New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 24 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 23, 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Teatro Espanol Compania

New York Post

November 20, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Spanish Company Does 'Don Juan'

This is mere hearsay on my part, but I have read that Zorilla's "Don Juan Tenorio," which was written in the middle of the last century, is one of the most popular plays of the Spanish theater, although it is not highly regarded by austere critics and the dramatist, himself, expressed considerable scorn for it. Anyway, if you want to see it in the original tongue, you can find it, or some other famous item of the classic drama of Spain, at the Broadhurst Theater, where a visiting company headed by Alejandro Ulloa, opened a brief period of repertory last night.

The Ulloa company, which has just completed a tour of Latin America, arrived without the accompanying celebration that greeted the local visits of Jean-Louis Barrault's French troupe and the Greek National Theater last year. This, I should imagine, has less to do with any suspected lack of quality in the work of the present visitors than with a desire on the part of their sponsors to avoid arousing any possible political passions. The reason could hardly be artistic, because the Spaniards, if not remarkably brilliant, are sound and vigorous actors.

My Spanish is certainly not sturdy enough to make me feel sure in the matter, but Senor Ulloa seems to be a resourceful and competent performer. Certainly, he makes a dashing and attractive Don Juan, with a proper air of the romantic about him. Of the supporting cast, Francisca Ferrandiz is a sympathetic Dona Inez, Pilar Olivar gets some racy humor into the role of a comic duenna, and Miguel Garcia makes something of a character of the part of Don Juan's servant. The audience vigorously applauded all of the long speeches.

If, at this point, you are beginning to harbor a baleful suspicion that I am putting off as long as possible writing about the play itself, you are doing me no injustice. Heaven knows, the legend is familiar enough. Don Juan, who boasts of his many loves, makes off with the willing Dona Inez and kills her father, who is so ungracious that he disapproves of their affair. But, according to the playwright, the famous lover had really come to love the lady, and when she, too, dies, he wanders about the cemetery, communing with statues and ghosts.

Memories of Shaw

There is something pleasantly ironic, I think, in the idea that this celebrated story of romantic love and passion is best known by theatergoers of this vicinity in the concept of Bernard Shaw, the last writer in the world to understand or approve of romantic passion. Possibly, therefore, it is a good thing to see the tale as set down by a dramatist who is more appreciative of its mood and spirit. But your Spanish had better be pretty good.

Senor Ulloa and his company are an industrious group of artists, and they are going to do some nine plays here during the next couple of weeks, including their own version of "Cyrano de Bergerac." I don't usually rely much on the attitude of first-nighters, but here is a case where I think it is only fair to do so. Let me say that applause never failed to follow a speech of several hundred words. And there were quite a lot of such speeches.

"DON JUAN TENORIO"

Play by Jose Zorilla; presented by the Spanish Theatre under the direction of Alejandro Ulloa and the auspices of Domingo Blanco and J. G. Del Pozo at the Broadhurst Theatre, November 19, 1953. The cast:

Don Juan Tenorio.....
Alejandro Ulloa
Buttarelli.....Manuel Calzada
Ciutti.....Miguel Garcia
Don Gonzalo.....Rafael Calvo
Don Diego Tenorio.....
Emilio Menendez
Capt. Centellas...Enrique Cerro
Avelianeda.....Jose Poveda
Don Luis Mejia.....Pedro Gil
Gaston.....Francisco Camacho
1st Policeman.....Luis Garcia
2nd Policeman.....A. Mendez
Dona Ana...Rosario de la Torre
Brigida.....Pilar Olivar
Lucia.....Carmen Pradillo
Abadesa.....Laura Bove
Dona Ines..Francisca Ferrandiz
Hermana Tornera..Rosario Torre
The Sculptor.....Luis Torner

Journal American

November 20, 1953

Ulloa Excellent In Facile Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE SPANISH Theatre company, headed by Alejandro Ulloa, bowed into the Broadhurst Theatre last night for a repertory engagement lasting three weeks and three days and including 10 performances of various dramas and comedies, all in Spanish.

The initial offering was entitled "Don Juan Tenorio" (Don Juan, the Lover), by Jose Zorrilla, which impressed this rather limited student of the language as a robust and facile production, admirably acted and mounted.

Senor Ulloa is a confident and gifted actor in any tongue, and he is ably assisted by Francisca Ferrandiz, his leading lady, and a large cast.

New York is becoming more and more a Mecca for such first-rate foreign theatrical groups, and one is delighted to welcome this distinguished company to a city in which their aesthetic traditions have deep roots.

Playgoers with a knowledge of Spanish will be well rewarded for a visit to the Broadhurst during the extent of the series.

In his current involvement Sr. Ulloa portrays the story of a brash blade who pays the price for a lot of big talk. It seems Don Juan has wagered his nearest rival that in the course of a year he would win the love of more women, fight more duels and kill more competitors.

When the day of accounting arrives the score stands at 72-56 ladies, 32-23 in dead duelists, with Don Juan on the winning end. This would seem to make him an easy champion, but his adversary points out that his list of ladies doesn't include anybody in the strictly amateur field.

Don Juan then says he will not only correct this fault, he will include his rival's girl in the list within a week.

Well, he doesn't quite succeed with his boast, but he does manage to add his rival to the score of dead duelists and, in the end, winds up a rather unhappy young man, beset by the images of all his dead friends.

From a purely local standpoint it seemed that many of the speeches became static and endless, while there were long lapses with a minimum of action. But these are highly stylized performances; the first night audience was entirely captivated by the precise and cultivated delivery of the players.

Amongst these one noted particularly Miguel Garcia, Rafael Calvo, Emilio Menendez, Pedro Gil, Pilar Olivar and Laura Bove. The scenery, some seven sets in all, is bright and imaginative, the costumes are authoritative.

The future repertoire should deserve the consideration of all who are interested in Spanish-language culture.

DAILY NEWS

November 20, 1953

Ulloa Spanish Actors Declaim and Declare In 'Don Juan Tenorio'

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

A sonorous Spanish actor and what the Spaniards call the drama of the poetica stopped off at the Broadhurst Theatre last night for a brief repertory stand. The first item was the 19th Century dramatic legend, Jose Zorrilla's "Don Juan Tenorio."

The star of The Spanish Theatre Company, which is actually sort of waiting for a streetcar to take it on another annual South American tour, is a handsome actor named Alejandro Ulloa. He has a first class company and his props and costumes are surprisingly fresh and clean and exact for a company which plans another rough journey.

Quite a Lot of Plot.

As for Ulloa's initial vehicle, it has just about everything a bravura actor would want. Silk capes swirl and sword play ensues. Novices are seduced out of convents and potential fathers-in-law are shot with derringers. Plumes sprout out of primitive berets and people wear masks for undecipherable reasons. And there is, of course, the talk. The talk is fairly interminable. Ulloa and his helpers stand stock still and talk and talk and talk. They talk well, indeed, but they talk for awfully long stretches. At one point last night it took Senorita Francisca Ferrandiz at least three minutes just to say "yes."

As an amateur Spaniard who can follow the mob as long as the mob doesn't talk too fast or in too heavy a dialect, I would still hesitate to detail the plotting of "Don Juan." For one thing, the playwright himself leaves a lot to be guessed at. Further, in this day and age it's a bit hard to get all roiled up about who killed how many duelists and overpowered how many willing senoras.

Ulloa himself is an accomplished leading man. The tax on his memory for "Don Juan" alone—to say nothing of the various other roles he will assay—is prodigious. I also thought Pilar Olivar gave an outstanding performance as the rasp-voiced and putty-nosed duenna.

For Spaniards and Latin Americans who have had no chance to enjoy the classical theatre of their blood, Ulloa and his company should be an exciting and unexpected treat.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

November 20, 1953

THEATER

'Don Juan Tenorio'

By WALTER F. KERR

Visitors From Spain

DURING the next few weeks the visiting "Spanish Theater" of Alejandro Ulloa will be unfolding a considerable repertory at the Broadhurst. In due time the actors expect to get around to such literary monuments as Calderon's "Life Is a Dream" and "The Mayor of Zalamea," with a traditional "Passion Play" promised for December performance.

To open the season, though, Senor Ulloa has selected something lighter and less imposing. As I understand it, Jose Zorrilla's "Don Juan the Lover" (was there some other Don Juan?) is a bit of nineteenth-century romantic nonsense standing roughly between the lyric sugarplums of Rostand's "Cyrano" and the cardboard claptrap of, say, "The Count of Monte Cristo."

• • •

A masked figure sits at a candle-lit table in one of those comic-opera taverns. He has no sooner made a stealthy exit than another gentleman arrives, his cloak held high about his face. Since the newcomer has no mask, he quickly borrows one. Close on his heels come three more masked figures. By the time the stage is a forest of glistening eyes, the principal foes reveal themselves. They are Don Juan, back from a season of conquest, and his arch rival Don Luis Mejia, equally fresh from the field. As the program note informs those of us who are unacquainted with the language, these eternal competitors have made a year's wager to see which "might conquer the love of more beautiful women, fight more duels, and kill more rivals." The wager leads to many things: to an abduction from a convent, to large-scale slaughter, and to our hero's ultimate battle with the ghosts of his dead.

• • •

Comedy and carnage are more or less mathematically alternated as the play climbs a ladder of rhetorical set-pieces. Don Juan settles down near center stage and reels off his victories of the season. (Applause from the audience.) Don Luis responds with an equally impressive catalogue. (Applause from the audience.) Don Juan declares his passion for the lovely Dona Ines. (Applause from the audience.) Dona Ines looks into his eyes and feelingly describes her own kindled fires. (Applause from the audience and unconcealed admiration from this reviewer, who found actress Francisca Ferrandiz communicating above and beyond all language barriers.)

• • •

The players approach their flamboyant work with a curious, level-headed reserve. Instead of diving into the rhetoric and splashing around for two or three hours, they begin by tossing it off in brisk and colloquial fashion. The attack is probably a helpful one: it no doubts clamps a lid on the old-fashioned fustian, it leaves quite a bit of room for casual comedy, and it provides a solid footing for the more garish fireworks to come.

Senor Ulloa, described in the program as the "foremost Spanish star of our day," is a sleek, handsome, youthful man (he's been running the company for fifteen years) with a crisp voice, a convincing leer and an ingratiating flair for humor. Francisca Ferrandiz plays in a light, lyric vein that is discreetly appealing. Pilar Olivar is a winning old crone as she hobbles about the stage, cackling and thumping a cane, in the role of Dona Ines' Duenna. Miguel Garcia, as the lackey-clown, spares us the coy buffoonery we have come to associate with costume horseplay.

• • •

The common-sense playing, however, has its drawbacks for theater-goers who like to look in on traveling troupes but haven't a shred of the language. The company at the Broadhurst is not possesed of a marked, original style of its own—there's nothing of the Barrault intention or the Barrault magic here—and you'd be ill-advised to venture forth without an interpreter.

The physical production is on the shoddy side. The uncredited scenery must, I suppose, be of the lightweight kind that will travel; but need the paint-jobs be quite so terrifying? The on-stage fencing is no tribute to the memory of Don Juan, and I'm still trying to figure out an unidentified pistol shot which dispatched one of the hero's victims while he was still having at him with a sword.

The New York Times

November 20, 1953

SPANIARDS OFFER 'DON JUAN TENORIO'

Theatre Troupe Gives Zorrilla Work at the Broadhurst—Ulloa Acts and Directs

By MILTON BRACKER

The remarkable thing about "Don Juan Tenorio," which the Spanish Theatre brought here last night for the first time since 1932, is the durability of the play itself. For not only were the rolling cadences of José Zorrilla resounding in the Broadhurst Theatre. The fact is that throughout the Spanish-speaking world, at this time of the year, All Saints Day and the Day of the Dead have come traditionally to be marked by performances of the 109-year-old work.

It was in March, 1844, that the curiously uneven portrayal of a universally legendary figure first opened in Madrid. Zorrilla, who had won fame at the age of 20 by a set of elegiac verses read at a critic's grave, wrote "Don Juan" in twenty days to save a theatre-owning friend from bankruptcy. Later in his own "Recuerdos" (Memoirs) Zorrilla saw his own play as "the greatest nonsense ever written."

Likened to Cyrano

Yet the fame of "Don Juan Tenorio" is perhaps the single dominant fact of Spanish classic drama. Audiences from Madrid to Buenos Aires—including parts of last night's—know many of the assonant verses by heart. With actors as handsome and tireless as Alejandro Ulloa playing Juan, those out front overlook the exaggerations and the improbabilities. They accept the complex supernatural scenes as readily as we welcome the simpler Shakespearean ghosts. And if at times they laugh where surely their forebears did not, well, lines like "Lay on, Macduff" have acquired a patina of mockery down the years too.

Señor Ulloa is playing a part that must delight the Walter Hampden of countless Cyrano's. (Rostand's piece will be the ninth in the Spanish company's repertory of ten plays.) There is enough of poetry, of glamour, or sword-play and swooning beauty—withal of cynicism, blasphemy and evil—to keep any actor playing Zorrilla's Don Juan busy for a night. And Señor Ulloa plays it as if he knows its secret: That every Spaniard (and every man?) likes to see himself as invincible to all other men and as irresistible to all women.

What clinches the appeal of the play is that despite his murders and his seductions, Don Juan is saved by the belle—in this case, Francisca Ferrandiz in the part of Doña Inés. Señorita Ferrandiz is not only beautiful, she is extremely moving in her first act love scene. It is unfortunate that when she reappears as a ghost, the staging emphasizes ghastliness rather than remembered beauty. In any event, her intercession saves Juan even though he has died unregenerate.

Plots, Wine and Swords

Among the lesser players, most notable is Pilar Olivar, as Brigida, the duenna to Doña Inés. What could have been a stock bit about the timeless old fool who lets her charge be stolen away becomes a sure, sharp, comic and yet uncomfortably malevolent crone.

Enrique Cerro as Captain Centellas has a convincing swashbuckler's air that does much to ring out that this is the Seville of 1545; that Charles V is Emperor, and the town is full of plots and wine and swords, of sinister wagers and false-sweet words and, in every case, the clink of the briber's coin.

The settings are good without being pretentious. Those who do not know the language will be sure to regard the work as static, with the action invariably lagging behind the declamation.

But that is all part of the tradition of Zorrilla, the laureate; and no one who loves "Don Juan Tenorio" really likes what happens as much as how the words sound. It is a good bet that they will keep on sounding the way they do for years, and that, at least once in a while, they will reverberate here in New York to the comfortable satisfaction of the audience.

At tomorrow's matinee, the company will offer its second production, "El Alcalde de Zalamea."

Daily Mirror

November 20, 1953

Spanish Repertory at The Broadhurst Worthwhile

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Domingo Blanco and J. G. Del Pozo brought Alejandro Ulloa's Spanish Repertory Theatre to the Broadhurst last evening for an engagement of three weeks. This famous Latin organization went to Cuba for four weeks and stayed five months; to Puerto Rico for two weeks and remained six months.

WE TRUST THAT Ulloa and his troupe will have a similar success in the U. S. We recommend a visit to the Broadhurst to students of the drama and those familiar with the Spanish language. It is always interesting to see what outstanding actor-managers are doing in other countries.

Ulloa is an actor-manager in the classic tradition. In New York he will offer works by Calderon, Peman, Guevara and Rostand. According to his representative, he is particularly fond of Calderon and Shakespeare. But he chose to open his season here with a 19th century tragedy, "Don Juan Tenorio," by Jose Zorrilla.

It springs, of course, from the Don Juan legend. An English approximation of the title is "Don Juan the Lover." It has to do with the fatal results of a bet between Don Juan and his rival, Don Luis Mejia. At the end of a year, Don Juan has won more feminine hearts and fought more duels than Don Luis.

BUT, DON LUIS points out that Don Juan has restricted his conquests to the experienced. Aroused by the challenge, Don Juan makes love to Don Luis's fiancee and entices the innocent Dona Ines from a convent. Challenged to combat by Don Luis and Dona Ines' father, he is forced to kill them both.

After an exile of five years, Don Juan returns to his native Seville, lonely and haunted by shadows of his victims. He finds solace in prayer.

Ulloa, who plays Don Juan, and his associates are schooled in the classic tradition. Their gestures are broad, they make their lines ring, but achieve scope with commendable restraint. The men of the company naturally act with more vigor than the ladies. The latter, particularly those in straight dramatic roles, have exceptionally soft approaches to their characters.

THE ULLOA COMPANY, in keeping with classic style, is more interested in suggesting types than individuals. They place the emphasis on the universal rather than the particular. It remained for the realists of our time to bring characterization down to the ultimate in individualism, to make a shop clerk unmistakably John Jones, shop clerk, not a representation of all shop clerks.

Ulloa is tall, has striking features, an excellent voice and moves with grace. It is obvious, even to one whose Spanish is less than fluent, that he knows how to put a glitter to a poetic line. Francisca Ferrandiz, as Dona Ines, is lovely and has a beautifully soothing voice. She conveys emotion with evocative simplicity.

There is an arresting characterization by Pilar Olivar, as a cackling, larcenous go-between.

THE SETTINGS are picturesque and exceptionally elaborate for a company on tour, where all theatres played haven't the backstage facilities of the Broadhurst. And the period costumes are really gorgeous.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

November 20, 1953

Broadhurst Gets Play In Spanish

By ROBERT BAGAR.

The Spanish Theater, whose guiding genius is Alejandro, Ulloa, opened an engagement of three weeks-plus at the Broadhurst Theater last evening with Jose Zorilla's dramatic poem "Don Juan Tenorio" ("Don Juan the Lover"). The repertory consists of nine plays, including the celebrated "La Vida es Sueno" ("Life Is a Dream") of Calderon, besides Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac.

"Don Juan Tenorio" is one of the standard works in Spanish dramatic literature and I was somewhat surprised to find it, in this production anyway, more restrained than I had expected. There is sword play (rather primitive, I thought) and there is heated discussion in it, though very little resembling the extremes of anticipated emotionalism.

An Advantage.

That is an advantage, of course, and so is the lack of anything like formal declamation of lines or of emphasis on rhymes. Throughout the reading was mostly at a conversational level.

None of the characters is fully drawn, the closest to that being the Don himself, who shifts from the sportive to the fiery with remarkable ease in the hands of Mr. Ulloa.

What dramatic tension the play has comes in small parcels, the largest located in the second scene of Act II, where the Don and a pair of convivial companions await the Stone Guest.

Comedy Not Absent.

Comedy is not absent, whether implicit in the lines or in the clownish actions of Ciutti, the Don's Lackey, and Brigida, who is the duenna of the hero's beloved. Miguel Garcia, as the former, and Pilar Oliver, as the latter, contributed much to the evening's pleasurable aspects.

As Ines, the beloved, Francisca Ferrandiz delivered her lines beautifully in a style closely approximating the classical. Her tones were emitted in lovely cadence, perfectly timed and with warmth and expression in every rise and fall of the phrase.

"Don Juan Tenorio" begins with a meeting between the hero and his rival Don Luis at a tavern where, after a year's absence, they have come to compare accomplishments in love and duelling.

The Don wins in a walk, although Luis claims that Juan had not included a single novice among his victims. Whereupon, given six day's time, the Don proceeds to correct this oversight, with the abduction of Dona Ines from her convent. Duels follow, resulting in the death of Ines' father and the wounding of Luis.

In his home, five years later, the Don, companioned by a Captain and another fellow, is haunted by apparitions. In a duel (which apparently takes place offstage) the Don is killed by the Captain. The last scene is in the cemetery, where following the pleas of Dona Ines, he attains peace through prayer and remorse.

"Escapade"

The New York Times

November 19, 1953

Roger MacDougall's 'Escapade' Stars Brian Aherne and Ursula Jeans

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Roger MacDougall's "Escapade," which has been fervently admired in London, has come to the Forty-eighth Street Theatre, where it opened last evening. Anglo-American relations will start deteriorating again. In the course of three shrill acts, Mr. MacDougall has some admirable things to say: That children are clearer-minded than adults, that peace must be won the hard way and that the signing of peace manifestoes by self-righteous egotists is not good enough.

Since Mr. MacDougall has a sharp pen he has written several excellent scenes. Apart from mettlesome comments on the basic obtuseness of adults, spoken by an attractive schoolboy in the second act, this column particularly admires the schoolmaster's declaration of faith in school children, neatly spoken by Melville Cooper; and also the last few minutes of the play.

* * *

In that last scene a precocious schoolboy who has flown to Geneva on a mysterious peace mission telephones to his parents who have given him up as lost. This is a genuinely moving scene—written tersely and acted honestly by able players. There are many aspects of "Escapade" that appeal to a theatregoer as high-minded thinking and superior writing for the stage.

But, alas, the play as a whole seems fugitive and trivial. Having two central themes, Mr. MacDougall shifts from one to the other halfway through the evening. And he seems to be so intent on entertaining the audience that he tosses off his interesting ideas as afterthoughts in the midst of farcical uproars.

Of course, one must not be puritanical in America, which is the home of the uninhibited. Our British allies constantly remind us that our culture is barbaric and no American would be guilty of the bad taste of replying. Still it is difficult to avoid the impression that Mr. MacDougall does not have enough respect for some good ideas that he would like to express in public. He dissipates them among amusingly satirical scenes set in a schoolroom and long, tedious scenes of family bickering in the first and last acts. "Escapade" is neither fish, fowl, flesh nor good red herring. Mr. MacDougall's eagerness to entertain the customers has broken the back of his play.

* * *

Donald Oenslager has provided two attractive settings that give the play a solid background. Before criticizing Alfred de Liagre Jr.'s direction as too insistently furious, one would have to be certain that a more varied tempo would be suitable. Perhaps it is necessary to whack every point with a sledge-hammer to remind the audience that "Escapade" is comedy and supposed to be hilarious.

In the circumstances, which are consistently frantic, the actors are first-rate. As the egotistical father who acquires humility at the end, Brian Aherne gives an accomplished, delightful performance. Ursula Jeans, as the mother whose instincts are sounder than her husband's mind, is equally delightful in a style that is less galvanic. If poppa and momma have to battle all evening, Mr. Aherne and Miss Jeans clash with all the strength and personal pride that are possible.

* * *

Melville Cooper, whose gravity around the mouth is always neutralized by the ironic gleam in his eyes, gives a capital performance as the indignant schoolmaster. As the schoolboy wise beyond his years, Roddy McDowall is thoroughly winning—managing in some fashion to keep the precociousness innocent and modest. Felix Deebank, as the cynical newspaper man with a heart of gold; Murray Matheson in the utilitarian part of the aging bachelor still true to his first love; Margery Maude, as the scornful representative of the oldest generation; Rex Thompson, as a polite but firm schoolboy of tender years—give interesting performances on the periphery of the play.

Good ideas and trifling workmanship in a play that has been spectacularly successful in London. Here we go again, tilting and skirmishing across the Atlantic.

"ESCAPADE"

Comedy by Roger MacDougall; staged by Alfred de Liagre, Jr.; settings by Donald Oenslager; presented by Mr. de Liagre and Roger L. Stevens in association with Henry Sherek at the 48th Street Theatre, November 18, 1953. The cast:

Stella Hampden... Ursula Jeans
Mrs. Hampden.. Margery Maude
Peter Henderson.....
Murray Matheson
William Saxon..... Peter Pagan
Sir Harold Cookham.....
Arthur Marlowe
John Hampden.... Brian Aherne
Walters.....John Moore
Dr. Skillingworth.....
Melville Cooper
Miss Betts.....Marie Paxton
Paxton.....Rex Thompson
Daventry.....Roddy McDowall
Andrew Deeson.. Felix Deebank
Molly.....Carroll Baker
George.....Nicholas Howard

DAILY NEWS

November 19, 1953

'Escapade,' a Success in London, Seems Unexciting on 48th St.

By JOHN CHAPMAN

We seem to have grown quite chummy with Great Britain politically, economically, militarily and even to some extent socially since the dustup of 1776, but theatrically we and the realm of the late George III are rapidly drifting apart. The rift in our relationship with the land of Shaw and Shakespeare was widened to a small extent by the production of "Escapade" at the 48th St. Theatre last evening.

One is told that in London "Escapade" has been a popular item with playgoers. In New York it is—at least to this critical son-oftherevolution—a bit of a bore. All its actors are personable and pleasant and its settings are handsome, but its content is small and practically pointless.

The author of "Escapade," Roger MacDougall, tells us at length about a belligerent advocate of world peace (Brian Ahern) and his wife (Ursula Jeans) whose three young sons have escaped from a fancy school by manufacturing a gun, shooting a school official in one of his two softest spots and stealing an airplane.

Offstage Excitement.

These boys, of whom the eldest is 16 and named Icarus, might be fairly interesting if they were permitted to appear on the stage—but they never are. Parents, relatives, headmasters, chums and newspapermen talk about the little rascals for three acts and five scenes, but that is the closest we ever get to them—and the talk is prolonged.

"Escapade," this juvenile prank is called. However, the prank is no prank; Icarus and his kid brothers have fled the school and snitched the plane in order to fly to Geneva and tell a United Nations meeting there that they are in favor of peace because they don't want to kill other little boys in other schools.

This must have been an exciting adventure, but while it is going on everybody else has to sit around and talk—in the case of the actors—or listen—in the case of the audience. And I don't think author MacDougall's thoughts on peace are novel or interesting.

Attractive Company.

Miss Jeans and Mr. Aherne are attractive and capable actors. They have nice support from Melville Cooper as a schoolmaster, Margery Maude as a mother-in-law, Felix Deebank as a journalist, Roddy McDowall as a teen-ager and Rex Thompson as a 10-year-old delinquent. The sets, a living room and a schoolmaster's study, are by Donald Oenslager.

I can't figure out why Alfred de Liagre Jr., Roger L. Stevens and Henry Sherek went to the bother and expense of bringing "Escapade" over here. And I can't figure out London theatregoers, either. Maybe they go to plays just to keep out of the rain.

Journal American

November 19, 1953

British Import Feeble Fare

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE returns from this precinct on "Escapade," the British import which arrived at the 48th St. Theatre last night, are not very encouraging. It seemed everything took an interminable time getting under way, came only briefly to life and then sputtered and conked out in a confused and unfulfilled last act.

Roger MacDougall, the author, has succeeded in creating one of the most crotchety and unsympathetic characters possible in the role of John Hampden, played by Brian Aherne, and the efforts of Ursula Jeans, as his wife, are not sufficient to make one concerned with what happens to them, their children, or their distant associates.

There are brief moments of humor supplied by Melville Cooper, Roddy McDowall and a brilliant youth named Rex Thompson, but the sum total adds up to something short of success.

Sudden Crisis

In his story Mr. MacDougall has invaded the home of a writer who is consumed with a passion for pacifism. So involved is he with international peace that he has nearly created a domestic crisis with his wife and has dispatched his three sons to a boarding school.

Then comes the sudden word from the school that one of his sons has shot a teacher in the thigh with a hand-made revolver, and with his two brothers, taken off in a stolen plane for parts unknown.

It requires most of two acts to disclose that the shooting was quite inadvertent and that the "mission" is a sincere and courageous effort by the boys to achieve some sort of international amity by delivering a youthful manifesto to the UN Assembly in Geneva.

This of course brings the belated realization to the father that his son is a semi Saint who has come close to success in the field in which he, himself, has failed. And with this his regeneration as a husband and a proud pater.

There is no quarrel with this premise, as such, but from the opening gun Mr. Aherne is required to rant and remonstrate with everyone within earshot, to dismiss his wife with the impatience reserved for lagging servants and to reveal himself, generally, as a high karat creep.

By the time the news of his sons' excursion is announced the feeling was widespread that the kids would be well advised to remain as far from home as possible, indefinitely.

Roles Suffer

As his wife it seemed Miss Jeans' part suffered from a lack of authority. Through no fault of hers or Mr. Aherne's there was never the slightest suggestion that this was a family that should be preserved; the playwright failed to capture us with their problem.

Margery Maude, Murray Matheson and Felix Deebank are others in the expert cast worthy of citation, and Donald Oenslager has designed two tasteful sets, but it is regrettable that "Escapade" emerges as rather feeble fare.

New York Post

November 19, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Fate of Another London Hit

Another big London theatrical success has arrived in New York, and seems unlikely to repeat in this vicinity the triumph it continues to register overseas. And another play which I enjoyed and admired when I saw it originally in England must be added to the melancholy and rapidly growing list of works that seem to have lost their savor in the process of transatlantic voyage. It is beginning to appear a little embarrassing. But once more I am stubbornly convinced that the change is not in me, but in the quality of the production and acting.

The play this time is Roger MacDougall's "Escapade," and it opened last night at the 48th St. Theater, with Brian Aherne, Ursula Jeans and Melville Cooper in its leading roles. It is about the conflict between generations, more specifically between the serious idealism of youth and the talkative, meaningless liberalism of its elders, and it sets out to do what Thurber and Nugent did so skillfully in "The Male Animal," combine a bright domestic comedy with an intelligent contemplation of contemporary ideas. In London, I thought it succeeded admirably.

The Idealist

Its central figure is a highly recognizable type, and one worth good satirical dissection: the idealist who is concerned with man in the abstract and cares nothing about him as a human being. A pacifist given to personal brawling, he is convinced that his sons are frivolous young scoundrels, bent on mocking his ideals, when he learns that they have started a row at school and flown off to the continent in a borrowed plane. It is only when he has discovered that they have headed for Geneva to present a petition to a United Nations meeting there that he sees they have tried to act while he has merely spouted platitudes.

Even at best, the final act of "Escapade," where it gets serious about its viewpoint, is unsatisfactory. But its central character is observed with skill and humor; there is an interesting lesser figure in the stuffy headmaster of the school, who seems to the father a butt for his scorn but proves in the end a man of character and integrity, and the middle act which takes place in the school during the uproar of the elders following the student riot, has excellent fun in it.

The Cast

Mr. Aherne, who plays the pacifist, went into the cast at fairly short notice, following the illness of Roger Livesey, who was scheduled for it, and this no doubt partially accounts for his comparative ineffectiveness. But I'm afraid he was wrong for it, anyway, and his explosiveness is neither believable nor properly humorous. Mr. Cooper, an excellent comedian, gets some of the fun out of the role of the headmaster, but there is more to the character than that, and this skillful actor's familiar method doesn't indicate the more serious aspects of the troubled pedagogue with the needed impressiveness.

Roddy McDowall, who was so fine in "Misalliance" last season, is satisfactory as a loyal friend of the runaways, and young Rex Thompson, by the fact of looking tiny, innocent and helpless, is right for the role of a student less guileless than meets the eye. I liked Felix Deebank as a reporter with a secretary; while Miss Jeans, as the insufferable liberal's long-suffering wife, and Margery Maude, as a lady with a sound skepticism about modern inventions, are at least passable. But "Escapade," as a whole, lacks vitality and resource in the performance, and now seems but intermittently provocative entertainment.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 19, 1953

'Escapade' Delights; Packs Emotion, Too

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Escapade," the new English comedy which opened last night at the 48th St. Theater, hovers verbosely on the outskirts of a perfectly delightful, wise story, which some day ought to make an outstanding moving picture.

In the physical limitations of the theater, it discusses all its main events, instead of depicting them. It makes you feel locked in the closet while a big exciting party is going on.

The author makes a valid and important, if not original point, that an ounce of action is worth a thousand words, particularly in the cause of peace.

His dramatic method contradicts his argument.

Hits Bottom of Barrel.

The central figure of the play is an ardent pacifist, who keeps losing signers of his peace petition, until he confesses even the Communists have run out on him, and he has struck the barrel's bottom.

While he is indulging his arrogance and pigheadedness, word comes of strange happenings at the school where his three sons are boarding. First the 12-year-old is locked up as a battling bully, then one of the teachers is shot. Finally the three boys disappear, and turn up in Luxembourg, where they have flown in a borrowed airplane.

The most enchanting character not in the play is the ringleader of the brothers, Icarus, whose word is gospel among his schoolmates. Suspense grows by report as he leaves his brothers and continues alone toward his goal, Geneva, then is unaccounted for.

Truth Comes Out.

When he is given up for lost, the truth comes out. He is taking a statement of the schoolboys to a United Nations meeting, a declaration that they now and in future refuse to kill their counterparts in other countries.

There is a good deal of emotion engendered by the inevitable finish.

"Escapade" is all hearsay. As such it may infuriate you with its sense of excitement which you cannot join. The reports of the action, and the discussion, are not so witty that you are willing to forego the first-hand experience.

Brian Aherne and Ursula Jeans play the parents, Mr. Aherne on very short notice. A little nervously overactivated last night, he offered a very clear portrait of a stubborn egoist, boyishly flailing about him and writhing with impatience. Miss Jeans projects the remnants of a woman's happiness with enough charm to hold promise for the wife's future.

Cooper's Refreshing.

It is a refreshing pleasure to see Melville Cooper in a comparatively straight role, the schoolmaster, which he acts with authority and appropriately acid comic strokes. Roddy McDowall is winning as a chum of the unseen boys, and avoids archness or pomposity as he proves the greater wisdom of his generation.

Young Rex Thompson has a memorable scene as a diminutive plant of the schemers, solemnly misleading the headmaster. Margery Maude and Murray Matheson are quite sane as two calmer members of the family, and Felix Deebank gives an air of romantic dissipation to the newspaper reporter.